Last Success

Stephen Jones
Horse Develkin sat the fence and stared off into nothing. Kaw Liga, John Paul called him as he walked by, and then broke into song, his oboe deep voice driving the cowbirds into flight. They filled the sky over J bar P. In their absence it was Horse at the driveway’s edge and fat John Paul half in the crewcab and John Paul’s wife who was afraid of the sun and John Paul’s daughter who read the paper to Horse when it came on Sundays. Horse, who had been able to read for already twelve of his nineteen years. He liked the way the words came out of her mouth though, or maybe it was just her mouth itself. He would sit and watch her read even voiced over pages of obituaries and comics, until there was no difference, until John Paul found them back by the feed shed or somewhere and gave him a shovel for the buffalo shit. The same tired story: father, daughter, drifter, father on the one side, daughter and drifter on the other. Across the strip of road from John Paul’s section were the blued lights of the new old drive-in, and they’d all seen the movies for free, they knew their roles.

And because of that it was different.

Horse’s role as he knew it now was to wait. It was the handful of days immediately following the crime, when nobody yet knew he was a criminal, the darling child of the media, adopted by the whole Midwest because the drought made them want so bad to look somewhere else than at themselves. Him the criminal, Horse the criminal. He kept it inside because he needed it, ached for it, the not knowing what would happen, whether John Paul would make him work forever to pay it off, whether the daughter would come to him in the night then like she never had, out of some skewed breed of pity. Everything was flat and open before him, rolling steadily away to the bruise colored foothills.

After John Paul had loaded the women into the truck and left him orders what to do he still didn’t come down off the
fence. One of the seven buffalo bulls lowed deep in its chest. In Horse's pocket was the last few inches of pigging string. Evidence. His crime was that he had coaxed each of the buffalo bulls one by one into the chute, then tied the leather tight around the high points of their scrotums. They hadn't caused any trouble. Kitten bulls he'd heard the seller call them once, John Paul's prized breeding stock. J bar P had a restaurant contract for a minimum of seventy hybrid calves, and, aside from the hole in the fence and the thin hipped Limousin already heavy as a result, it was only the second day they'd been let in with the nervous light stepping heifers. In no time now their testicles would be shriveled, the leather expanding and contracting with the dew, and it was during this week that Horse sat and watched.

He could do anything when he found out, John Paul could. The thing about him was that he'd made five fortunes already, and lost them all in neat succession, like dominoses falling. But he stayed ahead of them, so there was something. He was a genius he always said, smart in a corner. He had hired Horse out of the drugstore at town because Doll behind the counter knew Horse was half Blackfeet, that John Paul had him some newfangled buffalos, that it wouldn't look bad at all in the new J bar P brochures, not at all. John Paul had looked Horse up and down and said maybe, maybe. Now Horse wore his hair in stunted rough braids the daughter did. She said it made him look real. He lived in the old house John Paul's parents had pulled there on pine logs seventy two years ago. Tarpaper windows, packrat insulated. Not a tree in sight. For Horse it was a warm place to pass the Dakota winter, a place worth shoveling buffalo shit that still steamed sweet in the early mornings.

On Christmas they had burned the shitpile and stood wetfooted in the melted snow around it listening to John Paul sing his drunken yuletide. The daughter had come out to the old house afterwards and read Horse a newspaper she had from London somehow, and her mouth the words coming out all British was something of a gift in itself.

By the end of the week they knew.
At first John Paul just leaned on the pipe fence of the buffalo trap and shook his head and spat and wiped his lips with the back of his sleeve. Horse there guilty beside him, waiting. He waited all afternoon, breathing in and out. The mother watched through parted curtains, the daughter saddled her palomino gelding then took the saddle off and brushed him down. He snorted, his skin jumping in folds. John Paul mumbled to himself.

Twelve thousand dollars, just like that.

He moved his hand in a butterfly motion that never got above his belt.

Twelve thousand dollars. Buffalo burgers, buffalo sausage, fajitas, steaks, whole nine yards.

Finally he went inside to eat. Horse checked the water and oiled the windmill and wandered the barn. The daughter spoke to him out of the darkness of the horse stall.

Dad. He gets like this.

Yeah.

The gelding’s eyes glowed iris green.

So, you know, why’d you do it?

You mean the string?

What else.

Horse pawed the ground.

He won’t make that contract now, I don’t guess.

This doesn’t only hurt him, Horse Develkin.

Horse watched her there with the haydust tynsdaling golden all around.

I didn’t really mean to hurt him.

You should have maybe thought about that some beforehand. About me, or about Mom. She’s got eczema, you know. God—goddammit, Horse, I am his daughter after all.

She was all of sixteen. He looked away and when he looked back she was gone, only the gelding there staring. He cupped a hand to it and it shied away.

That night he woke to the tiled white ceiling of the county hospital and the pastyfaced nurse told him he was lucky John
Paul hadn’t used the business end of the shovel, or he’d be dead for sure. She handed him a piece of pigging string in a ziploc bag, and said in a hushed voice they were lucky too to find that. It had been a lucky night all around. She smiled a pearly white smile and when she was gone Horse tried to remember any of it, the night, but it was somewhere else. There was white tape tight around his chest though, and his lips sat wrong against his teeth, the left side of his face heavy and numb, pulling his head down.

Soon there was a gaunt faced man by his bed, mouth like a wolf or a librarian. He introduced himself as Jim Something from the Dakota Star. He was up here for the story about the outdated pharmaceuticals, but then he had heard about the string. Everybody had. He asked could he take a picture of it maybe.

Horse looked from him to it and back.
The pig string, you mean, right?
Jim Something smiled.
Nothing else, hoss.
Twenty two dollars.
How bout ten.

They settled on eleven fifty and a coke with a straw, and then Jim Something with a latex glove on arranged the string on the light blue blanket over Horse’s stomach and the flashes went on for days it seemed, and when they were over Horse finally stumbled into the bathroom and felt to see was everything okay.

This is the Horse Develkin who didn’t scream when he peed: he was born to a redheaded father and a Blackfeet mother; the mother left when he was thirteen and became for him birthday cards from the reservation, the Indian Preserve as his dad called it, the Petting Zoo. Horse learned to drink beer and whiskey at fourteen, and knew girls two years later in the abundant form of a woman named Rita at the five and dime. Stockroom love, hot and cramped. He didn’t write his mother about that. The same year as Rita, his older brother got his death money and drove drunk into a snowdrift and they didn’t find him until
late spring. He looked just the same. When Horse got his death money two years later he drove drunk into a snowdrift too, but the snowplow found him and rode him slow in the cab, back to the living. It still had to clear the roads though. His dad when he was sad in his coffee would tell Horse stories about how beautiful his mom had been, how he never should have chased her off like he had. It was a tragedy, goats in the street and everything. When Horse got enough money to put a new front end under his car he drove it down into the Dakotas, where he traded it for he'd already forgotten what. Probably something dumb like hot meals for a week, magazines to read, someone nice to look at. It was all a cliché, his life already, a cheap book. He didn't write his mom about that either.

Horse heard about it in the paper first, his crime and the crime that had been done on him: the beating, the string squareknotted around his balls. He was all the time afraid the daughter would appear around the corner and catch him reading. But he couldn't help it, it was him, his name, there in the Dakota Star, right below the low pressure system dangling moisture over Texas. Front page already, down at the bottom, "The White Man's Buffalo" in bold black letters. The pertinent excerpt from column b was:

In the later part of that century James H. Develkin's forefathers were on that starving reservation, specifically, his great-great-maternal grandfather, Grey Elk, and great-great-grandmother, Walks in the Trees, as well as their pair of young bucks, Last Success and Standing in Place. (for more see 3a)

The rest was about the Reader's Poll on 2b concerning whether John Paul's actions were justified or not (63% yes, 37% no). These dead Indians were names Horse had never known. As he wandered the sterile halls looking for a machine to take the last of his eleven fifty, his lips kept mouthing grey elk walks in the trees, last success standing in place, until it became for him a sentence and he couldn't forget it.

The second way Horse heard about the crimes done on
him was from the crewcut BIA lawyer, who had the story from the daughter. He said he was interested in James' welfare.

Horse, it's Horse.

BIA smiled, and set on the silvery bed tray a micro-recorder, asked if it was okay, for purposes of legal counsel. The pertinent excerpt of the interview here was the part that never made it to the radio:

BIA: Your tribal registration, James. (angry sound of papers shuffling).

HORSE: I know I'm Blackfoot, okay?


HORSE: Where's John Paul?

BIA: You've got to remember something, James.

HORSE: What did she say about it? (lots of tense staring noises)

BIA: Her story is that her mom got her out of bed because of the noise, because of you screaming. Out beside that place they kept you. We have pictures of the ground. The house too. She says that over dinner her dad Jonathan Rutlegers kept all the pieces of string by his plate. That he was mad, that he gets like that. And that's all. She says the next thing is running out to you and Jonathan Rutlegers. You were of course unconscious by then. And we have the shovel, don't worry. She said she tried to stop him with the leather string. He already had your, your pants down. She was the one who called the ambulance. Her voice is on tape, James (delicate sound of a smile). It's beautiful. It says, and I quote, Hurry, I think he killed him. I think he killed him. (long pause, for effect) Tell me what you remember though, James, Horse.

HORSE: What's John Paul have to say?

BIA: James, you have four broken ribs and a skull fracture. Not to mention your, the close call. You could have easily died.

HORSE: Tell me again what she said.

The rest of the interview that did make it to the radio in bits and pieces was about how Horse had tied the seven strings that one day, how yes the buffalo were tame, yes the buffalo was a significant animal in some ways he guessed, no, these were the first he had ever seen, no, he didn't know where his
mom was, try the reservation, maybe his dad would know. Then it all came down to sperm counts, average sperm counts for young Native American men. How a sample was required. There was the cup, virgin white and cold. When the BIA was gone, Horse sat with it until it became too large and too empty, and in retreat he stared out the window to the north where it was still flat in places, where campfires burned small and angry against the night, just outside the city limits. His mouth moved over and over the sentences grey elk walks in the trees, last success standing in place, he killed him, I think he killed him. Her mouth. He filled the cup two times in spite of the pain.

The next morning the campfire people were in the hall, the jobless Indian men who had seen the news through plate glass somewhere and drove to it, Blackfeet and Cree and Sioux and more, even a Mescalero from New Mexico. Through the rectangled doornwindow they were all denim jackets and truckstop bandannas, their shoulders hunched over. For a while there was only the sound of their bootsoles, but then suddenly there was no noise at all, no buzzers, no gurney wheels, nothing. It had all stopped: John Paul stood in the door and filled it side to side, a pair of old jeans over his shoulder, piece of paper in his hand. There was a lilt in his voice like bourbon.

Don’t it just make your brown eyes blue, Kaw Liga?

Horse watched him approach, saw how he didn’t watch his back.

The piece of paper was the hospital bill, stamped red and paid. He gave it to Horse: $1,478.34.

Horse stared at the receipt for minutes, counting the dollars. The only breathing was John Paul’s rasp. When Horse looked up to John Paul, John Paul nodded once and spit a brown stream into the nurses’ flowerpot. Horse shook his head little enough not to hurt. But enough. John Paul tossed the old jeans onto the foot of the bed. They were starched thick and smelled like the daughter, and then Horse saw her at J bar P waiting for him, leaning on the porch railing like in a painting over a motel bed. He slipped into the jeans as best he could, taking care of his ribs, then walked the gauntlet of staring black eyes
in the hall. He answered their silence by remembering how she looked ironing the early mornings away, framed by her gilt white window, delicate columns of shit steam holding up the sky. He kept a hand on John Paul’s shoulder, so he wouldn’t fall.

On the way out of town they stopped for a shiny new shovel, and John Paul told Horse who had been quiet that in the paper they’d started in calling him the Pope, John Paul, the Great White Father of all Great White Fathers.

Yeah, so what do they call me?

John Paul laughed out the side window and finally broke into song again, Werewolves of London. For reasons no one bothered with it had become the anthem for both sides of the 63/37 split, and it was on every station by request at least five times an hour, a war waged in the static land of radio waves.

When it got to the howling part John Paul had his head out the window and almost ran them off the road altogether.

This is the Horse Develkin who hid from phone calls the next three weeks in the old house, listening to the AM news and watching the Indians settle into the parking lot of the drive-in: he learned that his last name alone meant related to the devil, but when paired with Horse, a name which when improper carried with it running, really meant the demons of genocide chase him across the plains of his ancestors, the plains of America. He learned that the buffalo he’d emasculated were also a symbol, that if allowed to breed they would have been just one more instance of Native American culture as roadside novelty, another menu item for the guilty to stomach. It was just talk though. He had just done it; emasculation was a word, and words were far from the thing at best. They hadn’t had the balls in one hand, the string in the other. And he wasn't running. He walked from wall to wall in the house instead, trying to breathe a full breath. He wrote letters to his mom on the back of bean can wrappers and then burned them in a tin bucket to watch the moths dance. At night he heard the ghosts of John Paul’s parents chasing things across the wooden floor, their long fingers scrabbling after pennies and beer tops and anything
shiny. He watched the reflection of his face in the window become him again, except pale and sunless, like his brother’s the day they pulled his car out of the snow and counted how he still had seven hundred dollars and change in his wallet, money that nobody wanted. When it was day he watched for her to walk by the kitchen window of the big house. All the while the farmland sat fallow and the AM radio crackled, making it feel even more dry. The letters came a dozen at a time and John Paul rubberbanded them on the windowsill. Horse was afraid of being caught reading them, so didn’t. And it worked. One day towards the end of the three weeks, the night after John Paul had slept on the porch his ancient ten gauge stuffed with rock salt, she saddled and unsaddled her gelding three times and finally came out to the house, to Horse. She said she felt sorry for him.

The first thing she told him was that most of the letters were from the same group of women in Florida. Horse wanted to say something but all he could think of was the cup over and over. She read him one, which was a photocopy of a book page about Blackfeet legend, but her voice was distracted. She flipped through some more and told him maybe the whole book was there, twenty cents at a time, probably a hundred dollars’ worth. After reading him a couple of stories about Napi and about Bloodclot she was on her knees behind him, braiding.

You know your mom’s on TV now, with all this.
She says she named me after that one movie.
She’s so pretty, Horse.
Thank you.
Dad’s going to sell one of the bulls, you know. They’re famous now, stars. A couple of days I think.

She finished the braid and messed it up and started over. Her fingers in his hair. She danced all around the question the sperm count hadn’t answered—what it had felt like—talked instead about the hospital the nurses the news reports. Horse remembered then that it had been her.

They say you saved my life.
Who?
I don't know, somebody.
She laughed.
No, Dad says you're tougher than that. He said Indians don't die that easy. That's why we had the Old West, Geronimo, Sitting Bull, all that stuff.
But I heard that recording of you on the radio, on the phone.
He said that that stuff about your grandparents is made up, too. He told it to Jim in the first place.
The reporter Jim?
She finished the braid and began arranging the letters by zip code. Most of them 32301–32306. Jim jim jim. When she stood Horse told her thank you again.
For what?
For reading these to me.
It's nothing.
No, really. Thanks.
Horse.
She said it through her teeth, her cheeks smiling. Horse smiled a little too, and when she was gone and it was night he hid in the closet and read more about Napi and about Bloodclot. When the chants rolled across the pasture he could smell meat roasting, and for a few minutes in a row he wanted to go there, close his eyes, lower his head, and dance.

The next night was the closest he got. John Paul was in town yelling for the reporters about the bull he'd lost to the thieving Indians at the drive-in. It was a thing of no evidence though, or none that anybody wanted to look for anyway. There hadn't even been any gunshots. The feast made the state news too, Indians in tepees stalking and eating buffalo again, the seeds of revolt, the Ghost Dance ninety some years later. The ratings were through the roof. The mother was glued to the TV. The daughter was brushing her gelding down. Horse approached her and they stood at the door and watched the movie flicker blue in the distance. She was the first to say anything.
Which one is it?
Can't tell.
And there was the gelding right there. They rode him double and bareback out to just shy of the highway, where they could see a spliced together White Buffalo playing, Charles Bronson thinlipped and full of anger and love, but mostly anger. They sat the gelding and she watched the movie and Horse watched her there in the extra light, and it was over hours too early.

Two days later right on schedule John Paul sold one of the now historical buffalos to a Plains Indian museum, who planned on mounting it for exhibit, actual string and all. Five thousand dollars, tax deductible. In an effort to raise the price of the remaining five, John Paul said he was going to make of them an endangered species. Horse was repacking the bearings on the J bar P stock trailer before breakfast when the white Dakota Star van coasted in. Jim Something kneeled down and watched Horse clean his hands in the diesel.

How’s them ribs, hoss?

Good.

Horse didn’t look up. When John Paul climbed down from the windmill where he’d been watching the Indian women bathe, they leaned on the trailer and discussed business arrangements.

Well let me see it already.

Jim came back from the van with the longest rifle Horse had ever seen, even longer than a goose gun: octagonal barrel, elevated sights, ancient stock twisted like a tree root.

Sharps. The real thing, JP. What they used back when.

Shit, Jimbo, anybody can buy themselves a fancy ass gun.

Jim smiled and in his pocket had a finger long Big Fifty cartridge. He slid it in the breech and asked what was there? John Paul looked around at all the nothing that was too close and his anyway, and finally pointed his chin towards the drive-in screen. He held his binoculars towards it and said the first footlight on the east side, barely a dot. Jim smiled and sighted for a long time over the trailer tongue. Horse backed away and stood by the daughter who had come to watch, still in her nightgown, her hair everywhere. When the gun finally spoke
it spoke with a deep authority, and a few seconds later John Paul with the binoculars again to his face said goddamn, boy. Jim turned towards the daughter, her hands over her mouth, no sleep in her eyes.

Ma’am.

He tipped his co-op hat to her. She smiled and rushed back inside, holding her nightgown around her legs. Jim told John Paul he guessed he’d get full coverage, pictures of course, maybe a hot meal or two, and John Paul just said it again, goddammit, boy. Jim smiled.

I’ll just sleep in the van, back to north somewhere.

As he was pulling away John Paul yelled to just dust them at first, just dust em, be careful for God’s sake, and Jim waved his hat out the window and was gone into the north pasture where the heifers were, opposite the drive-in. Horse stayed in his house for the rest of the day, until the daughter came out and read him a handwritten letter he said looked important, was from one of the book ladies maybe, probably. It said over and over in a nervous hand, Girl I love don’t worry about me, I’ll be eating berries on the way home. No address. At dusk she rode off on her gelding with supper for Jim Something, pork chops and biscuits and gravy, still warm. Horse waited up until she came back with the dishes a full hour later, and then stood out by the trap until something thumped into the dirt at his feet. In a few seconds he heard the voice of a .30/.30 rolling over from the drive-in. Return fire, hours too late. He could feel it in the ground though, how it could have landed anywhere. He stood there with the buffalo until their sluggish movements told him it was time to go back inside.

In three days it was even in the big city papers: there was a buffalo hunter again in the Dakotas. The front page picture was a mushroomed slug of the past, a thing leaden and undeniable. John Paul stayed mostly inside, making up things for Horse to do: scrape the stock tank, dig out the feed shed with the new shovel. The shots came at regular intervals, maybe four in a day, starting around eleven in the morning. The buffalo stood nosing the grass, their bovine eyes not registering danger.
Sometimes Horse would throw sweetcake or dirtclods at them, to keep them moving, but they either didn't feel it or thought it meant feed time again. The daughter made two trips a day out to Jim's camp, in shorts and boots, her legs shaved clean for the saddle. Horse read the trickle of letters himself, the whole book of legends twice over, in duplicate. He helped load a pair of the endangered buffalos up for the Los Angeles Zoo, $12,000 altogether, John Paul said, it was worth losing that one.

That one was the small bull that had finally made the Zoo listen. Jim had had to put six into it before it finally staggered to its knees and fell, trying to get through the hole in the fence. Horse finished it, with a piece of rebar that took days to grind into a point. Jim took pictures of him doing it, the killing, but the film didn't come out, just two vague bodies blurring into one. To make up for it he got a series of shots of the dead buffalo over the next few days, bloating up in the sun and finally sagging back to the ground, the ground mottled with cowbird shadows.

One night a rented helicopter hovered over the drive-in, standing on its beam of light, getting historical footage of a camp being pelted with wind and dirt. A rock clanged in the blades but there were no voices across the pasture. The next day the drive-in Indians began their final retreat, and John Paul called Jim Something in and explained the situation: if everything was the same come Wednesday, put the two slow bulls down. Maybe he could get something for their hides if there were enough fifty caliber holes in them. Jim just said he was hungry out there all alone. He said it for the daughter and Horse stood there and looked back and forth from one to the other, but couldn't remember what he was supposed to do right then, his role. But it had to be something.

That night he walked out to the drive-in and talked to an old Sioux woman picking all the silvery beer cans out of the asphalt. Her back was bad and she had to push the cans into a pile by the speaker and then follow it down for them. Horse helped her until there were no more, and standing there with her plastic bag of moonlight she told him she never thought
she would eat killed the old way buffalo before she died, it was her little girl dream, real medicine. She asked Horse if he'd had any.

No.

Horse didn't say his name. White Buffalo played on the screen without any sound, without any love and without any anger. From a pouch at her side that looked like a bull scrotum she gave Horse some dried meat crushed with berries, and told him it might be his last chance for it, chew it slow and don't ever forget.

That night Horse ate the bitter meat and opened his eyes onto turnip holes that dangled green rawhide ropes into other worlds. He followed hand over hand, and was reborn in the dirt of a wounded buffalo. When his people found him all he could ask was Grey Elk?

Walks in Trees? Last Success Standing in Place?

They just smiled and opened the smoke hole on his tepee so he wouldn't cough any more. There was no one there he knew. At night he would sometimes crawl out against the starflecked darkness and his fingers would be looking again for that turnip hole home. When he finally found it it was late late morning and the radio had forgotten that werewolves ever roamed the earth. He clicked it off and rubbed his eyes. In the trap he fed the last three buffalo with shaking hands, because as much as he looked away, there was still something green and thin at the outside edge of his vision. This is the Horse Develkin who caught the scent of turnips for a moment and closed his eyes tight.

That night the narrow Limousin went into labor and John Paul was already into his second bottle and singing from deep in his belly. To the east there was lightning and on the weather radio word of tornadoes. Farmers for miles around stood sober and waited to be carried away. The last three buffalo turned their faces into the wind and leaned into it. Horse led the momma cow breathing hard into the barn, and she was too scared to hook him away. He whispered into her ear.
It'll be alright momma, we're here momma, just hold on now, hold on.

In the barn it was Horse and drunk John Paul and John Paul's singing and by eleven when the power went out the daughter too, and even the mom, standing far in the corner and crying for the cow, who could only low in pain and roll her eyes. The daughter circled them with the lighter, all the candles blowing out over and over. By two when the calf should have come more than it had, John Paul held the momma cow's ears closed and said that this was trouble, he'd be sober in thirty minutes. He took his shirt off carefully and went and stood in the cold rain coming down, and in the quiet he left there was Jim Something in the door, backlit by the electric sky. He was covered in mud, but the gun was clean in its fringed sleeve. He looked at the cow panting on its side and looked at Horse lying there with it in the shit she'd let. He smiled his empty mouthed smile.

You want I should finish her?

He held the gun around the middle. Horse shook his head no.

It's breech I think. Maybe locked.

Is it one of them?

Half.

Jim nodded and went to a corner to dry his camera. He stood the gun by the door. Horse said everything he knew into the momma cow's ear. The mother was gone, maybe back inside, maybe holed up in the feed shed hiding from the moisture and the birth. The candles blew out one by one and the daughter didn't relight them. They were talking in whispers, Jim and the daughter, and then nothing. Just darkness and cow breathing.

Horse held his hands over his ears when the noise of them started, but in his head it was worse: wet sounds, mouths like they were hungry. He whispered words over and over to drown them out and even sang to himself John Paul's dumb mechanical songs, but still he heard when she made a small sound like no.

Horse stood in the darkness. They were quiet again, just hay crunching, cow pain. He thought of Charles Bronson.
thinlipped and then he remembered walking the hospital hall, guilty, a traitor, the black eyes staring after him. His hand lighting the candle was steady but already when he was walking to their corner he knew he couldn’t talk words. Jim was on top of her and she was half-fighting him, half holding on. Jim shook his head and said it:

Get the hell out of here, hoss. I ain’t joking now.

Horse’s first kick caught Jim in the lower side of the back. He dropped the candle into the damp hay with his next kick, which rolled Jim off the daughter. She was holding her mouth to scream but no noise. Her shirt unbuttoned, a breast bone white in the haydust. As Horse kicked Jim over and over he remembered for the first time that night, waking to John Paul standing over him with the shovel, unsmiling, whiskey and anger in his eyes, mostly anger. The sweated wood taste of the handle coming down out of the darkness once twice and more, his blind hands trying to fight the string. When it was over Jim was lying in a balled up pile by the door, tears and red rain coming down off his new beard. He was screaming mist and it filled the wooden place. He started to say something about a hole the size of a fucking pie melon but threw up on his legs instead and couldn’t say anything. Horse reached for a bridle on the wall and Jim stumbled off into the night, long gun in tow. John Paul spat in his trail and walked inside.

Never much liked that son of a bitch.

John Paul knew his part. The wetness steamed off him. He walked soberly to the smoldering hayfire with a bucket of rainwater and killed it. The daughter had her shirt buttoned up wrong and was crying, trying to fix it. John Paul stood over her and didn’t say anything, which made her cry more and harder. Horse couldn’t look in her corner.

It was already just an hour and a half til dawn. They fought with the momma cow, John Paul and Horse. John Paul was too fat so Horse had to lie on his side with his arm up in her and try to turn it. It felt like nothing else, like another world in there. He blew birth out of his mouth and the veins stood out in his neck and still he couldn’t get it turned. They gave her some time to do it herself, let it happen, but she was weak and
this was her first. When dawn was just a handful of minutes away John Paul finally decided it was her or the calf, goddammit, and the calf was probably already dead anyway, half breeds were never that strong.

The mother brought a bowl of sugarwater from the house, for the cow, and when she was gone John Paul and Horse drank it and spilled it down their shirtfronts and closed their eyes. John Paul wasn’t singing. Horse was holding his side where his ribs were again separated.

You okay there?

Horse looked John Paul in the face and nodded yes.

What about her though.

John Paul breathed a few times slow and then got the rope out, made a small loop. Horse hooked it to something inside the momma and they doubled it around a smooth post and pulled the dead thing unkicking into the world. John Paul severed the cord with the toe of his boot and threw it end over end up into the rafters. The momma cow licked the caul off and it would have been beautiful, brown and front heavy like its daddy, thick shoulders, short face.

John Paul held its head up by the right ear, ran his hand backwards along its wiry soft hair, making it look bigger than it was. He was nodding to himself, looking to Horse and then back to the calf. Finally something inside him shifted and he started in laughing without smiling.

I’ll be good and damned if this was all for nothing, now.

He walked away and came back with two gallons of bleach, dragging a half whiskey barrel filled with rainwater, sloshing up his arm. He said he figured he must be some kind of genius.

Horse stood covered in green birth and shit and blood. He watched and didn’t watch as John Paul mixed the bleach and cradled the calf into the barrel. The momma was too weak to fight for it. The smell in the air was heat. John Paul closed the calf’s eyes with his forearm. The bleachwater beaded on his starched shirt and rolled off. When a few minutes had passed the hair fading stopped just short of white, just shy of the last thing that might bring the whole world to the barn. The mix
was too damned weak, John Paul said. He held the calf body under and pointed to the house with his chin.

Go tell her to give you that other bottle, Kaw Liga. One under the sink.

Horse didn’t move. John Paul turned his wide back on him, and his voice was large off the tubwater and the empty part of the barn.

This ain’t no time for no Indian bullshit. Not now, not from you. Now get.

Horse didn’t say anything, couldn’t, didn’t know what there was to say. He rubbed his eye and turned around. Somewhere out on the highway were the drive-in Indians, going somewhere else, maybe home, maybe just going to keep driving until the blacktop quit. He walked slow through the mud to the backdoor of the house and the mother handed him the bottle when he asked. Her face was dry and cracked. Horse was almost back to the door of the barn when he heard her, the daughter, coming around the house on her gelding. She was running hard for the north pasture, her hair floating golden white behind her. Horse held the bleach up for her to see him before she left but it was pulled from his hand and splashed in the empty spaces behind. The report of the Sharps rolled in what felt like minutes after. Horse stepped forward, and there it was again in the ground, the breath of dust, the slug in the ground, close enough to feel, to ache for, with the sound a long time later. He stood still, watching her, mouthing the words.

I’ll be eating berries on the way home.

He had watched a movie once with her, and as she rode the flatness north he breathed the feeling in and held it.